



# Menstruation Pack

Aligned with the  
CAPS Life Orientation Curriculum

Compiled by:

Bronte Davies and Lucca Munnik (Periods For Hope)

# Table of Contents

## **BASICS OF MENSTRUATION**

<i>Puberty and the Menstrual Cycle</i>	<b>1</b>
<i>Four Stages of the Cycle</i>	<b>2</b>
<i>Normal and Abnormal Periods</i>	<b>3</b>

## **MENSTRUATION MANAGEMENT**

<i>Health Issues Related to Menstruation</i>	<b>4</b>
<i>Period Management</i>	<b>7</b>

## **STIGMA OF MENSTRUATION**

<i>Myths about Menstruation</i>	<b>9</b>
<i>Gender Norms and Menstruation</i>	<b>10</b>
<i>Male Role in Menstruation</i>	<b>10</b>

## **ACTIVITIES**

<i>Activity 1: Puberty</i>	<b>11</b>
<i>Activity 2: Misconceptions</i>	<b>12</b>

## **REFERENCES**

<i>References</i>	<b>13</b>
<i>Resources</i>	<b>14</b>
<i>Answers to Activity 1</i>	<b>15</b>
<i>Answers to Activity 2</i>	<b>16</b>

# Basics of menstruation

## Puberty and the menstrual cycle

During puberty, females begin to produce eggs in the ovaries and males begin to produce sperm in the testes. Hair will grow in the pubic and underarm regions, and females will begin to grow breasts. Males have higher levels of *testosterone*, whereas females have higher levels of *progesterone* and *oestrogen*. Females start experiencing monthly cycles, due to changing hormone levels. These monthly cycles are known as menstrual cycles, and consist of a period of bleeding known as *menstruation*, or a 'period'.

The female anatomy can be seen in Figures 1 and 2 below:

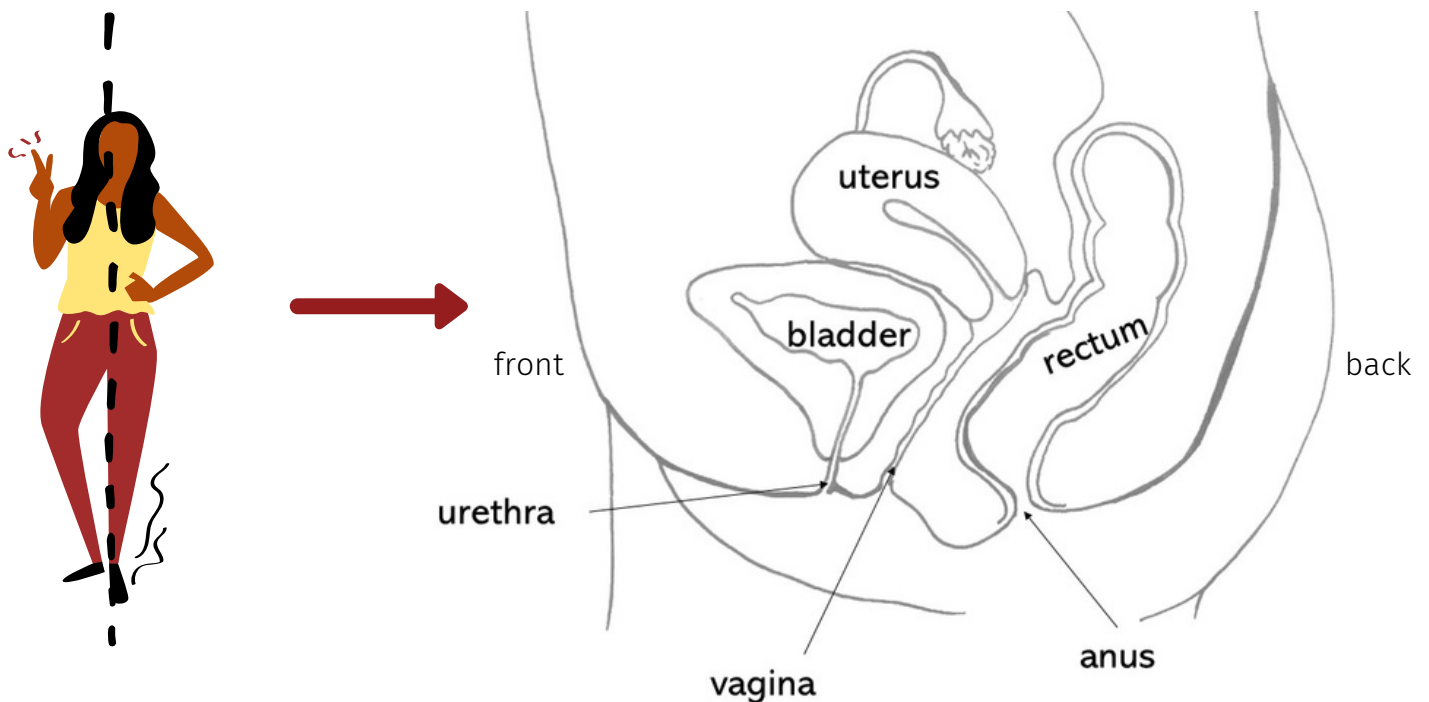


Figure 1. Section through female reproductive, urinary and digestive system



It is important to note that not all people who menstruate are ciswomen. This means that people they may not identify as a girl or woman despite having female reproductive anatomy. See the *Sexuality & Gender Resource pack* for a more in-depth exploration.

## The menstrual cycle consists of four different stages:

- An egg will begin to develop in the ovary. The lining of the uterus, called the *endometrium*, will begin to thicken.
- The ovary will then release the egg into the *fallopian tube*. The endometrium will continue to thicken to prepare for pregnancy.
- The egg moves to the uterus and if it is not fertilised, the endometrium will begin to break down and disintegrate.
- The endometrium is then shed through the *vagina* as blood, tissue and mucous. This is a 'period', which is the bleeding phase of the menstrual cycle, and will usually last between 2 - 7 days.



If the egg is fertilised by a sperm and a female becomes pregnant, the body will produce human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG). This helps thicken the uterus lining and is the hormone that pregnancy tests will detect.

Each menstrual cycle lasts about 21 - 35 days. However, everyone is different and will have a different cycle length. During pregnancy, all events of the menstrual cycle stop and there is no menstruation. The cycle is often irregular for the first few years after the period begins but should become more regular over time. The menstrual cycle will stop at about 50 years of age: this is called *menopause*.

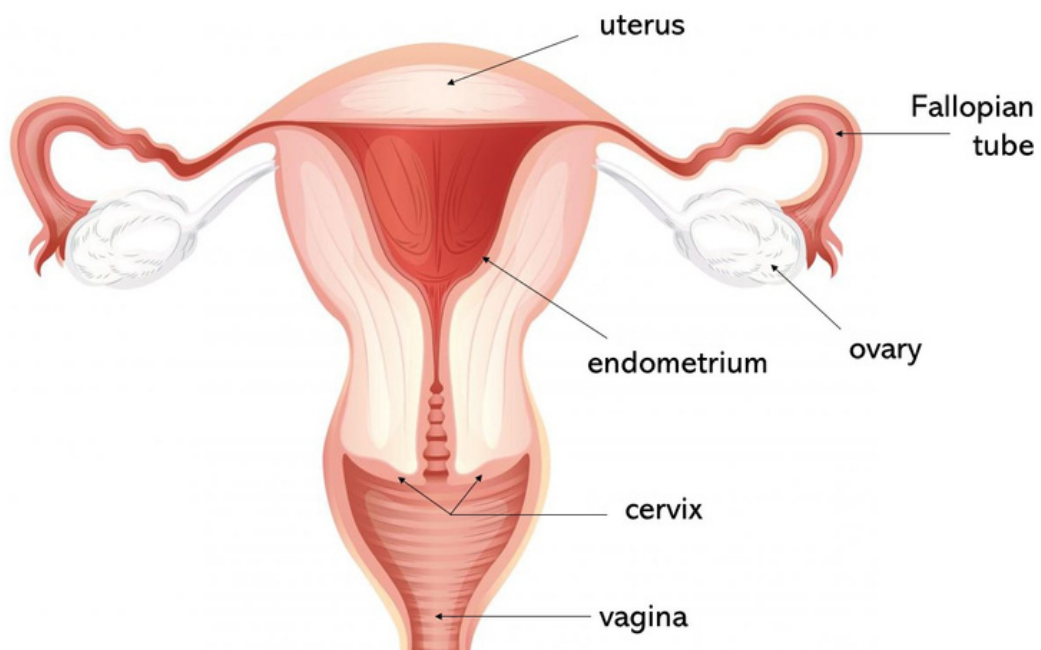


Figure 2. Section through female reproductive system

## When females have their period, it is normal to feel:

- Stomach cramps
- Nauseous or faint
- Sore and tender breasts
- Headaches and tiredness
- Backache
- General discomfort
- Emotional and psychological changes, such as sadness, irritability or anger. This is due to changing hormones.



Abnormal uterine bleeding is a set of symptoms that may include: no bleeding/absent period; irregular periods; vaginal bleeding between cycles; heavy bleeding that lasts longer than 8 days.

If you experience these symptoms, it is a good idea to seek medical advice.

## Reasons for having abnormal periods:

- Stress and inadequate food intake
- Use of certain medication (including contraception)
- First two years after females start their periods
- During pregnancy
- During frequent breastfeeding
- Menopause



# Menstruation management

## **Premenstrual syndrome (PMS)**

These are normal physical and emotional symptoms experienced leading up to a period. They are different for everyone, and can also change throughout life.

### **Symptoms may include:**

- Swollen or sensitive breasts
- Headache or backache
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Bloating
- Cramps
- Irritable
- Feeling tired
- Problems sleeping
- Cravings or changes in appetite
- Trouble concentrating
- Tension or anxiety
- Depression
- Low sex drive



It is quite normal for females to experience PMS. Over 90% of women get some premenstrual symptoms.

## **Health issues related to menstruation**

Females are at risk of developing menstruation-related health issues. The disorders described below are not a complete list but are some of the more common ones experienced.

### **Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS)**

This is a rare but fatal disease and is caused by bacteria. Infections have been linked to the use of high absorbency tampons.

#### ***Symptoms include:***

- Rash
- Skin desquamation
- Hypotension
- Muscle aches
- Confusion
- Vomiting or diarrhoea

### ***Preventing TSS:***

- Wash hands before and after inserting a tampon
- Not using tampons, or using sanitary pads intermittently with tampons. If using tampons, change tampons regularly.
- On lighter flow days, use pads
- Store used and unused tampons away from heat and moisture, where bacteria grows.

### **Endometriosis**

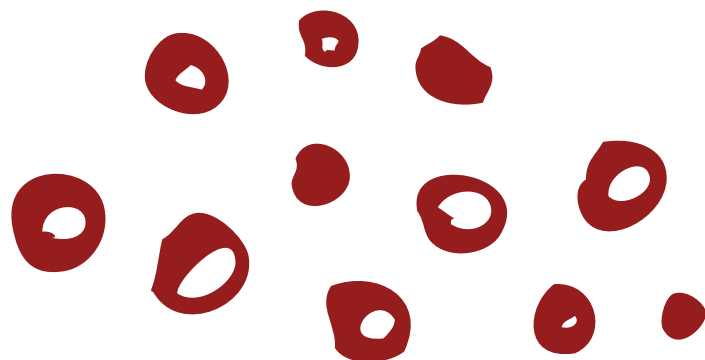
Endometriosis occurs when tissue similar to the lining of the uterus grows outside of the uterus and on other areas in the body. Most often, endometriosis is found on the ovaries, fallopian tubes, tissues that hold the uterus in place and the outer surface of the uterus.

### ***Symptoms include:***

- Very painful menstrual cramps
- Chronic (long-term) pain in the lower back and pelvis
- Pain during or after sex
- Painful bowel movements or pain when urinating during menstruation.
- Bleeding or spotting between periods.
- Infertility
- Stomach (digestive) problems, including diarrhoea, constipation, bloating, or nausea, especially during menstruation.

### ***Preventing Endometriosis:***

- Sticking to birth control methods (pills or patches) that have lower doses in oestrogen.
- Exercising regularly.
- Avoid large amount caffeinated drinks as this can raise oestrogen levels.



## Fibroids

These are non-cancerous cell growths that develop in the uterus. They consist of muscle and fibrous tissue and vary in size. They often accompany very few symptoms.

### *Symptoms include:*

- Heavy and painful periods
- Stomach pain
- Lower back pain
- Frequent urge to urinate
- Constipation
- Pain or discomfort during sex.

### Preventing fibroids

- Maintaining a healthy diet by consuming foods rich in fibre can help decrease constipation related to uterine fibroids.
- Exercising regularly. This induces endorphins that manage pain and reduce cramping.
- Drinking water helps reduce bloating and consuming hot tea can increase blood flow may relax cramped abdominal muscles. This can also help constipation and symptoms of anaemia (low iron levels).

## Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD)

This is a severe form of PMS (premenstrual syndrome). It includes physical and behavioural symptoms that usually resolve with the onset of menstruation.

### *Symptoms include:*

- Extreme sadness (or depression)
- Hopelessness
- Irritability or anger
- Anxiety and hopelessness
- Tiredness and low energy
- Overeating and trouble sleeping
- Severe PMS symptoms such as breast tenderness and bloating.



**If you experience one some of these symptoms regularly, seek professional medical advice.**



## Period management

It is important that females are able to appropriately manage their menstrual cycle. This is to prevent any infections and also makes the menstrual cycle easier to cope with on a monthly basis. Between 20 and 40 mL of blood will be lost during each cycle (about 3 tablespoons).



### Menstruation can be managed in the following ways:

#### 1. Friends and Family

Females often receive little guidance or support from family members and this can cause them to feel scared when they first get their period. It is important for people to assist girls and women during their period.

#### 2. Sanitary Products

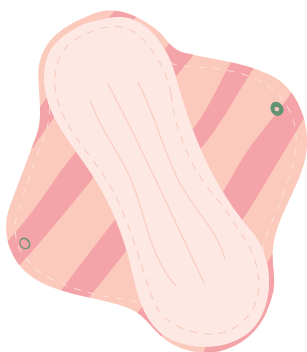
The choice of sanitary protection is a personal decision based on what females think is acceptable and what works best for them.

#### *Some options that girls and women use during their period include:*

- Strips of cloth
- Toilet paper or tissues
- Cotton wool disposable pads
- Reusable pads
- Tampons (with or without applicators)
- Menstrual cups or menstrual sponges



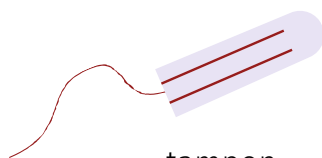
Tampons, cups and sponges cannot 'get lost' in the vagina. The vagina is a closed canal that ends at the cervix, which prevents anything from going further in!



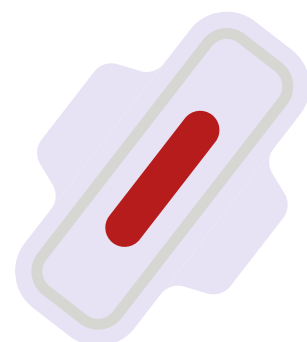
reusable sanitary pad



menstrual cup



tampon



sanitary pad

### 3. Hygiene

- Wash genitals with clean water every day
- Pat the area dry and put a fresh cloth pad, cotton or tissue on your underwear. Keep unused cloths and pads clean (wrapped in tissue or plastic bag) to use later
- Keep spare cloths or pads in case they get their period during the day or at school
- Remember: females can do their normal daily activities while menstruating.



**It is false that women and girls cannot bath or swim while on their period. Tampons, cups and sponges are ideal for managing a period while swimming if accessible.**

### 4. Physical Well-being

It is vital that females are able to look after themselves and their bodies during menstruation. If possible, they should try to eat healthily and sleep well. They should also ensure they have ways to reduce pain if necessary.

**Some ways to manage period pain include:**

- Placing a hot water bottle on the lower stomach area
- Taking a warm bath or drinking a hot beverage
- Taking a walk, stretching and/or exercising
- Rubbing or massaging the lower stomach area.
- Eating foods that are high in magnesium (e.g. peanut butter, potato) and iron (e.g. chicken and beans) can reduce cramps and prevent iron deficiency.



### 5. Mental Well-being

There are many taboos attached to menstruation which can negatively impact girls and women. These include; the assumptions that females are unclean or that they pose a risk to others. Girls and women also receive little guidance from those around them regarding menstruation which can result in them feeling more pressure and confusion. It is important that they ensure to look after their mental health during menstruation.

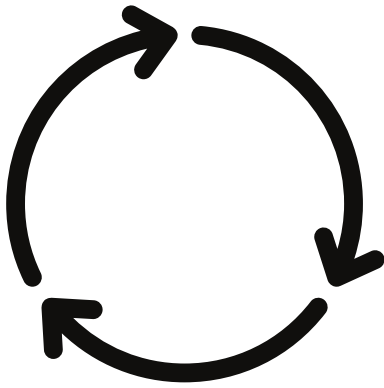


**Periods are not dirty, shameful or unclean. It is a normal and natural part of life.**

# Stigma of menstruation

## Myths about menstruation

There are many cultures that have myths relating to menstruation. In fact, there are also various practices that are associated with periods. Some of these myths and practices restrict girls and women by denying them the freedom to partake in activities and from being themselves.



### The Negative Cycle

Myths are referred to as common misbeliefs about something and are often based on little scientific evidence. Spreading myths about periods makes it become a stigmatised topic and taboo which means that society does not talk about it. If nobody talks openly about a topic then we compromise the health of women and girls. This creates a negative cycle that often leaves girls and women feeling alone and insecure. They also face health risks because of misinformation.

### Some examples of menstruation myths:

- ✗ *Washing the body during menstruation causes infection or infertility.*  
Keeping clean at any time of the menstrual cycle does not affect fertility. Maintaining good hygiene and washing frequently throughout their cycle, especially during your period, is healthy and encouraged.
  
- ✗ *Girls and women should not cook during menstruation.*  
Periods are not unclean or dirty. Girls and women can partake in daily activities as usual.

## Gender Norms and Menstruation

Gender is also associated with specific roles and expectations around behaviour. These might seem like they are based on biological fact, but they are not. For example, a father might want to look after his child but feels pressured to leave it up to the child's mother because this is her perceived 'role'. Girls and women also face expectations and roles when transitioning into puberty and they may feel pressure to live up to specific standards.

In South Africa, menstruating girls experience discrimination because of such standards. They experience lower self confidence and health risks because of inadequate access to sanitary products to manage their period. This means many girls and women are forced to miss school or work because of restricted access and affordability of products, adding to the shame and stigma already experienced around menstruation. To tackle stigmas around menstruation and improve the livelihoods of girls and women, everyone needs to be open to discussions about periods (that include factual information and dispel myths) as well as gender roles, norms and beliefs.



## Male Roles in Menstrual Health

Men and boys have roles to play in supporting their wives, female relatives, friends and colleagues in their menstrual hygiene by:

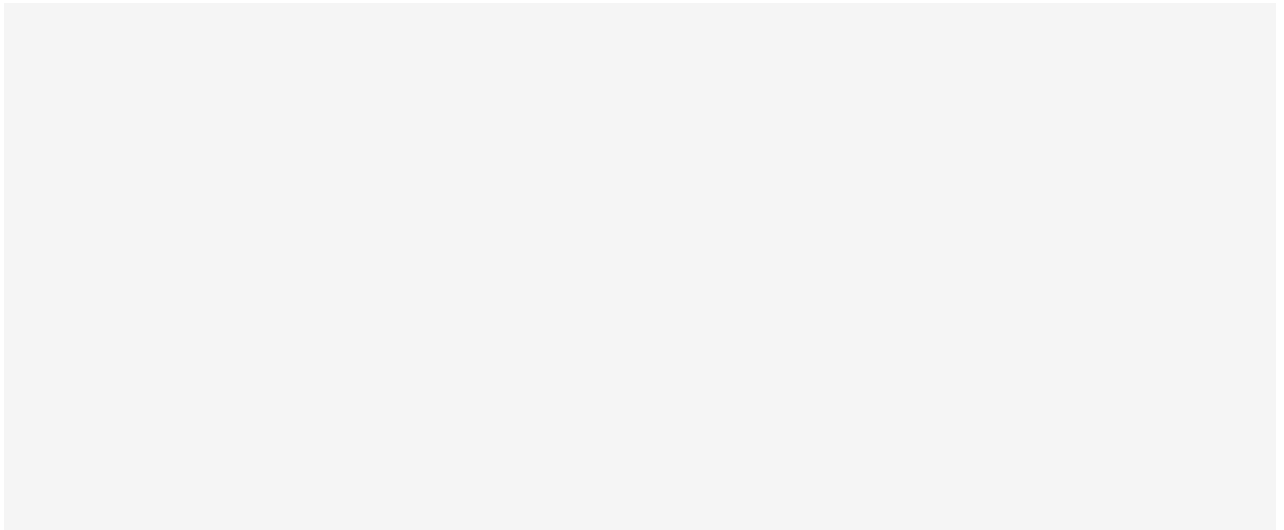
- Challenging negative attitudes and perceptions.
- Sharing information on good menstrual hygiene practices.
- Participating in local production of menstrual products.
- Ensuring women and girls can afford sanitary materials.
- Addressing barriers to water and sanitation for the hygienic management of menstruation with privacy and dignity.
- Respecting women and girls.
- Being supportive and understanding, acknowledging that periods are not unclean but are normal parts of female life.

# Activity 1: Scenarios

## **Scenario 1:**

Ziyanda is sitting in class. When she gets up from her seat, there is blood on her school skirt. Ziyanda has not realised but two boys have. These two boys begin to make sarcastic, hurtful comments. Ziyanda does not understand what they are talking about but begins to feel uncomfortable.

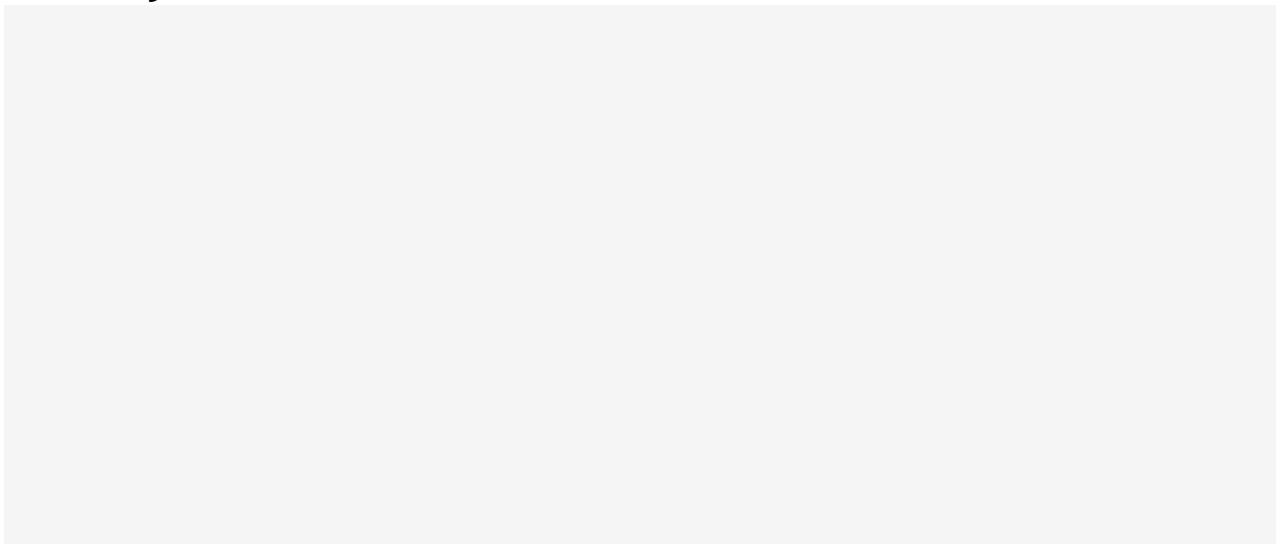
**What do you do in this situation?**



## **Scenario 2:**

Your classmate Mihlali is diligent, does well at school and often helps you with homework. However, one week in June, she misses three days of school. You begin to wonder where she is and so you ask one of her friends. Her friend tells you that Mihlali has gotten her period for the first time and that her father makes her stay at home because she is unclean and cannot work during this time.

**What do you do in this situation?**



# Activity 2: True or False

Read each statement and identify which is true or false.

When a female is menstruating, they cannot play sport.

Stress and inadequate food intake can lead to abnormal menstruation

Friends and family should help females during their periods.

All menstrual cycles last 28 days

Women and girls need to wear tampons during their period.

# References

1. Cavill, S., House, S. and Mahon, T., 2012. Menstrual Hygiene Matters A Resource For Improving Menstrual Hygiene Around The World. WaterAid.
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5. International Federation for Gynecology and Obstetrics. 2015. Committee for Menstrual Disorders.
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# Resources

## **Links**

[Periods For Hope Menstrual Tracker](#)

[Always, Tips and Advice](#)

[Hello, Clue](#)

## **Instagram Accounts**

[@periodsforhope](#)

[@scorauct](#)

[@shawco\\_uct](#)

[@themenstrualproject](#)



# Answers to Activity 1

## Scenario 1:

- You ask to speak to Ziyanda privately and tell her that she has leaked on her skirt.
- You then either help her to the nursing station to get a sanitary product or advise her to change her own.
- If you feel Ziyanda might be uncomfortable talking to you, ask a female teacher or her friend to assist.
- You can call the boy learners out on their behaviour, reminding them that periods are normal, natural and should not be shamed.

## Scenario 2:

- The myth that girls are unclean limits Mihlali's access to education. Although it would be tricky to meddle with the father's strict rules, the myth of girls being unclean on their period is something you understand has a negative impact on education.
- Understanding this, it would be a good idea to collect homework or other important information from class and leave it in Mihlali's locker.
- When Mihlali returns from school, you can tell her that you'll support her by ensuring she has access to the parts of class she misses every month.

# Answers to Activity 2

1. When a female is menstruating, they cannot play sport.

**False.** Females can do any activity they would normally do while menstruating.

2. Stress and inadequate food intake can lead to abnormal menstruation.

**True.** Females can miss a period if they are malnourished or stressed.

3. Friends and family should help females during their periods.

**True.** It is important that women and girls receive social support while menstruating. This will not only aid in ending the stigma of periods but will also help menstruators to struggle less during their period.

4. All menstrual cycles last 28 days.

**False.** The average cycle lasts 28 days. However, this varies from person to person and can range anywhere from 21 - 35 days.

5. Women and girls need to wear tampons during their period.

**False.** It is important that women and girls are free to choose which sanitary product they would like to use. This choice does not always have to be tampons, and must be whatever they are most comfortable with.

# Periods For Hope

## ABOUT

Periods For Hope (PFH) is a registered non-profit organisation that aims to empower high school learners by running sexual health workshops. These workshops include intimate discussions about menstruation, gender, self-esteem and gender-based violence (GBV). PFH aims to educate about sexual and reproductive health as well as empower girls and young women to be agents of their bodies. In addition, it also aims to educate young male learners on gender-based violence practices, the importance of supporting their female counterparts and ending the stigma of menstruation.

## FIND PERIODS FOR HOPE ONLINE:



[www.periodsforhope.org](http://www.periodsforhope.org)



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